**'The Great Dictator,' by and With Charlie Chaplin, Tragi-Comic Fable of the Unhappy Lot of Decent Folk in a Totalitarian Land  
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**By BOSLEY CROWTHER**

Now that the waiting is over and the shivers of suspense at an end, let the trumpets be sounded and the banners flung against the sky. For the little tramp, Charlie Chaplin, finally emerged last night from behind the close-guarded curtains which have concealed his activities these past two years and presented himself in triumphal splendor as "The Great Dictator"—or you know who.

No event in the history of the screen has ever been anticipated with more hopeful excitement than the première of this film, which occurred simultaneously at the Astor and Capitol Theatres; no picture ever made has promised more momentous consequences. The prospect of little "Charlot," the most universally loved character in all the world, directing his superlative talent for ridicule against the most dangerously evil man alive has loomed as a titanic jest, a transcendent paradox. And the happy report this morning is that it comes off magnificently. "The Great Dictator" may not be the finest picture ever made—in fact, it possesses several disappointing shortcomings. But, despite them, it turns out to be a truly superb accomplishment by a truly great artist—and, from one point of view, perhaps the most significant film ever produced.

Let this be understood, however: it is no catch-penny buffoonery, no droll and gentle-humored social satire in the manner of Chaplin's earlier films. "The Great Dictator" is essentially a tragic picture—or tragi-comic in the classic sense—and it has strongly bitter overtones. For it is a lacerating fable of the unhappy lot of decent folk in a totalitarian land, of all the hateful oppression which has crushed the humanity out of men's souls. And, especially, it is a vithering revelation, through genuinely inspired mimicry, of the tragic weaknesses, the overblown conceit and even the blank insanity of a dictator. Hitler, of course.

The main story line is quite simple, though knotted with many complications. A little Jewish barber returns to his shop in the ghetto of an imaginary city (obviously Berlin) after a prolonged lapse of perception due to an injury in the World War. He does not know that the State is now under the sign of the double-cross, that storm troopers patrol the streets, that Jews are cruelly persecuted and that, the all-powerful ruler of the land is one Hynkel, a megalomaniac, to whom he bears—as a foreword states—a "coincidental resemblance." Thus, the little barber suffers a bitter disillusionment when he naively attempts to resist; he is beaten and eventually forced to flee to a neighboring country. But there he is mistaken for Hynkel, who has simultaneously annexed this neighboring land. And pushed upon a platform to make a conqueror's speech, he delivers instead a passionate appeal for human kindness and reason and brotherly love.

Thus the story throws in pointed contrast the good man against the evil one—the genial, self-effacing but courageous little man of the street against the cold pretentious tyrant. Both are played by Chaplin, of course, in a highly comic vein, beneath which runs a note of eternal sadness. The little barber is our beloved Charlie of old—the fellow with the splay feet, baggy pants, trick mustache and battered bowler. And, as always, he is the pathetic butt of heartless circumstances, beaten, driven, but ever prepared to bounce back. In this role Chaplin performs two of the most superb bits of pantomime he has ever done—one during a sequence in which he and four other characters eat puddings containing coins to determine which shall sacrifice his life to kill the dictator, and the other a bit in which he shaves a man to the rhythm of Brahms's Hungarian Rhapsody.

But it is as the dictator that Chaplin displays his true genius. Whatever fate it was that decreed Adolf Hitler should look like Charlie must have ordained this opportunity, for the caricature of the former is devastating. The feeble, affected hand-salute, the inclination for striking ludicrous attitudes, the fabulous fits of rage and violent facial contortions—all the vulnerable spots of Hitler's exterior are pierced by Chaplin's pantomimic shafts. He is at his best in a wild senseless burst of guttural oratory—a compound of German, Yiddish and Katzenjammer double-talk; and he reaches positively exalted heights in a plaintive dance which he does with a large balloon representing the globe, bouncing it into the air, pirouetting beneath it—and then bursting into tears when the balloon finally pops.

Another splendid sequence is that in which Hynkel and Napaloni, a neighboring dictator, meet and bargain. Napaloni, played by Jack Oakie, is a bluff, expansive creature—the anthesis of neurotic Hynkel—and the two actors contrive in this part of the film one of the most hilarious lampoons ever performed on the screen. Others in the cast are excellent—Paulette Goddard as a little laundry girl, Henry Daniell as a Minister of Propaganda, Billy Gilbert as a Minister of War—but Oakie ranges right along-side Chaplin. And that is tops.

On the debit side, the picture is overlong, it is inclined to be repetitious and the speech with which it ended—the appeal for reason and kindness—is completely out of joint with that which has gone before. In it Chaplin steps out of character and addresses his heart to the audience. The effect is bewildering, and what should be the climax becomes flat and seemingly maudlin. But the sincerity with which Chaplin voices his appeal and the expression of tragedy which is clear in his face are strangely overpowering. Suddenly one perceives in bald relief the things which make "The Great Dictator" great—the courage and faith and surpassing love for mankind which are in the heart of Charlie Chaplin.

**Film Review of the Great Dictator**[**Roger Ebert**](http://www.rogerebert.com/contributors/roger-ebert)

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Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator" (1940) came some 12 years after the introduction of sound, but it was Chaplin's first all-talking picture, and the first in which we heard the Little Tramp speak. The dialog turned out to be his last words; Chaplin never used the Tramp character again after this film.

In a way, the Tramp's heartfelt closing plea for peace and human brotherhood is spoken by Chaplin himself, stepping out of character to make a personal statement on the eve of the war with Hitler. The speech does not fit into the fabric of the rest of the film (as many critics noted at the time), but the passage of years has made it seem uncannily appropriate.

Chaplin conceived and filmed "The Great Dictator" during a period when an accommodation with Hitler was still thought possible in some quarters; indeed, he must have been filming when Neville Chamberlain went to Munich. But Chaplin himself had no such optimism, and his portrait of Adenoid Hynkel, dictator of Tomania, was among the first declarations of war on Hitler. The film also prophesied the persecution of the Jews, and the scenes of storm troopers terrorizing the Ghetto were thought at the time to go too far. What a sad joke that seems today.

The film itself is filled with sad, pathetic little jokes; this is Chaplin's most serious, most tragic, most human work. He did not find Hitler at all funny, needless to say, and so although he uses his own comic genius to inspire the movie, the comedy is never neutral. It is jugular, as he creates a Hynkel who is a vain, strutting buffoon, given to egomaniacal rages and ridiculous posturing. Charlie never for a moment allows us to laugh with Hynkel, but only at him, and Hynkel thus becomes the only totally unsympathetic character Chaplin has ever played. To balance him, Chaplin also plays the part of a Jewish barber who happens to be Hynkel's exact double (and who also happens to look exactly like the Little Tramp).

There are some good belly laughs in the movie, most of them involving a state visit by Benzoni Napoloni, dictator of the neighboring nation of Bacteria. As played by[Jack Oakie](http://www.rogerebert.com/cast-and-crew/jack-oakie), Napoloni is a loud, cheerful, idiotic clown whose natural zest for a good time cuts right through Hynkel's phony dignity.

It's during the Oakie scenes that we get many of the film's most famous comedy moments: the futile attempt to seat Napoloni on a very low chair, so Hynkel can tower over him; the negotiations during the banquet, when Hynkel says he will destroy his enemies just like this (and attempts to rip apart a handful of spaghetti, but can't), and of course the classic barber-chair scene, in which each dictator tries to pump himself higher than the other.

There are also immortal moments of Chaplin pantomime. He shaves a customer in time to classic music. As the Jewish barber, dressed in the stolen uniform of the dictator, he nonchalantly reviews "his" troops and then sits in a folding chair that collapses, causing complete confusion. And, as the dictator, he does the famous ballet with the world globe painted on a balloon.

"The Great Dictator" is the third of seven Chaplin films being revived at the Carnegie as part of a salute to Chaplin that will include his accepting a special Academy Award on April 10. The prints of all of the films are from Chaplin's private collection and are flawless; the story is that he allowed their theatrical release, after keeping them off screens for so many years, because there is a current generation that does not know Chaplin. To judge from the applause and the genuine appreciation I sensed at the Carnegie the other afternoon, it is getting to know him now.